



The Right Start in Life

Exploring an innovative new online career solution

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Foreword by Matthew Riley

I am pleased to introduce this new research paper from Professor Hooley and his colleagues at the International Centre for Guidance Studies.

It explores Start, an exciting new online careers resource which is designed to support young people to develop their careers.

I left school at 16 with no real advice or guidance as to the right path for me to take. Thankfully I have found a path that has brought success on many levels, notably the creation and growth of Daisy Group.

As an employer and a parent I am concerned about the ability of young people to make a successful transition to the workplace. I can see huge differences between individuals and how far their education has supported them to develop their potential and prepare them for their career. This is what drives my passion to level the playing field, providing the best quality careers advice to all young people in England.

When I first decided to invest in Start, I was excited by its potential to transform the lives of young people and to provide a strong connection between education and employment. Now that the product has been released I am even more excited by the potential we have created.

This report echoes my excitement. It highlights that Start is an innovative new solution for an education system that has been in perpetual turmoil. It suggests that schools are looking for something that offers them strong, sustainable and affordable solutions to the delivery of career guidance. I believe that Start is that solution.

Professor Hooley argues that Start meets the needs of young people and schools and that it aligns well with what the best evidence in the field tells us is effective. Start offers a blended model of career guidance, which allows schools to target their resources to where they are most effective. The report also highlights that Start will help schools to overcome their main barriers to delivering excellent career guidance. It is free to use, it is easy to use and it provides a comprehensive, independent and impartial service for schools.

We have had an amazing three months since we first launched Start. We already have over 800 schools signed up to use it and the level of interest has been unparalleled. Start is destined to become the centre of England's careers ecosystem and we will soon see Start in every school and college in the country.

As Professor Hooley notes, as Start becomes more embedded in England's education and employment system it opens up exciting new possibilities for improving that system. We are already seeing how the data that is collected by Start can transform the provision that is offered by schools. Better tracking leads to better provision and a stronger ability to measure the impact of what has been done. In the future this opens up the possibility of using the data to build insights for a range of stakeholders at regional and national level.

I commend this report to you and hope that it will inspire you to engage with Start ■

Matthew

Chairman of U-Explore

Executive Summary

This report introduces Start, a new product which is designed to revolutionise the education and employment system through the provision of high quality, independent and impartial online career support.

The economy of the UK is dependent on the skills, knowledge, entrepreneurship and drive of the population. Every year the country spends billions of pounds on education but the system remains poorly integrated with the world of work. As the range of jobs and the complexity of careers increases, the need for better integration becomes ever more acute. At the heart of this problem are generations of young people leaving schools, colleges and universities. If they are well prepared for their futures they have the potential to make a major impact on the economic and social prosperity of their community and country.

Career guidance describes a range of educational interventions that are designed to bring about better integration between the worlds of education and work. However, the provision of career guidance has been patchy and dependent on a range of government programmes, which have waxed and waned as the political climate has changed.

Start is a new and free resource developed by U-Explore which will empower schools and colleges to deliver high quality, independent and impartial career guidance to students. Building on the existing evidence base in online career guidance, it provides career and labour market information combined with personalised diagnostic tools which support career decision-making. Crucially, it delivers career support for individuals whilst integrating with the wider career support that schools and colleges offer. This cutting edge approach can be described as an ‘enriched virtual model’ for the delivery of career guidance.

U-Explore has made a substantial financial investment in the development and rollout of Start, which is independent of any direct government funding. Development capital has been provided by the entrepreneur and philanthropist Matthew Riley and the company has developed an innovative internet based business model. U-Explore reports that it has already signed up over 800 schools and that the company can see a clear pathway to the profitability and sustainability of Start, whilst ensuring that the core software is always free for schools and colleges.

Start offers personalised information and opportunities to students which take account of who they are, where they start from and where they want to go. The software not only provides factual information, but also draws on multi-media qualitative information. Of particular interest is the Three Minute Hero campaign using a smart video-capture technology to populate Start with real career stories from real people, tagging them in order to help young people find inspiration from their local area, school alumni or people doing the jobs they aspire to do.

For schools Start provides much needed resources, support and structure for the delivery of career guidance. After years of endless policy turns and u-turns, Start provides a resource which is independent of the latest government initiative and therefore a sustainable model around which schools can build their careers provision.

Start can help schools to meet their statutory duties, satisfy Ofsted and provide what the Gatsby Charitable Foundation describes as ‘good career guidance’. It does this by viewing schools as the key intermediaries who can support young people’s career development, offering a structure for careers work and invaluable intelligence on the level of learner engagement with careers.

As such Start is not attempting to replace professional career education and guidance, but rather to create a blended model through which schools can discharge their statutory duties.

At the heart of the software is the capacity to track student’s career exploration and career decision-making. For schools and colleges this provides insights as to how their students are engaging with their careers and guides the targeting of additional support where required. Over the long term this tracking also promises to offer major benefits for schools in being able to manage information about student destinations.

At a systemic level Start offers a sustainable approach for the provision of career support. As it achieves widespread market penetration it will create a careers ecosystem within which schools, colleges, universities and employers are all able to interact more easily and to mutual benefit. In joining up the interests of these different stakeholders, it will bring about a more integrated system. One of the key advantages that Start offers each of these stakeholders is the fact that it tracks user behaviour. The data that is gathered from this tracking has enormous value as it can potentially be transformed into intelligence which can underpin the local skills system.

The way in which Start tracks the career exploration and career decision making of learners also opens up exciting opportunities for researchers and policymakers. As this data becomes available it promises to provide valuable insights and intelligence on individuals’ career development and on the operation of the education and employment system.

The present study is not an evaluation of Start as the product is only just emerging into the market. If it is to be successful it is important that the team continue to pursue a developmental iterative design process and that they continue to seek feedback from users and input from external evaluations. The authors of this report are keen to remain closely involved with Start as it unfolds in order to use the data that is captured to inform its ongoing development and to answer wider research questions.

There is much to be excited about with Start. It offers a new approach to an old problem and as it develops, it may pave the way to a much more effective education and employment system in England ■

1. Introduction

What's amazing is, if young people understood how doing well in school makes the rest of their life so much interesting, they would be more motivated. It's so far away in time that they can't appreciate what it means for their whole life.

Bill Gates (Entrepreneur and philanthropist)

I believe without a single shadow of a doubt that it is necessary for young people to learn to make choices. Learning to make right choices is the only way they will survive in an increasingly frightening world.

Lois Lowry (Author)

Every year hundreds of thousands of young people leave schools to continue their lives through work and further study. Every one of these young people has the capacity to contribute to their community, the country and the world. Some will be academic high flyers going on to study in the nations' elite universities. Others will go straight to work. And still others will pursue vocational courses in workplaces, colleges or universities. The range of post-school possibilities continues to grow, while the labour market becomes ever more complex.

For some the transition from school to work goes badly wrong. There are currently 853,000 young people (aged from 16 to 24) who are not in education, employment or training in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2016). But, even for those who make successful transitions from school, the challenge is not over. Recent research by Accenture highlighted the reality of graduate under-employment and showed a mismatch between graduate expectations and the labour market (Barea and Vasudeva, 2015). Such research builds on work by the Education and Employers Taskforce that has highlighted the mismatch between career aspirations and the available jobs (Mann et al., 2013).

It is easy to focus on the challenges of building a career in a country that is still struggling to recover from recession. However, there are huge opportunities for young people. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills has set out 40 jobs of the future ranging from aircraft pilot to web designer and biochemist to pipe fitter (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2014). The Commission argues that these jobs will attract good pay, that there will be lots of job opportunities and that they will fulfil a business need. Yet all too often young people do not know about the opportunities that these jobs offer. In fact, in many cases they do not even know that these jobs exist.

Young people experience a range of difficulties in making choices about their future careers. These difficulties include:

- not realising that they are making a career choice (for example when choosing GCSEs);
- only having limited experience to draw on from their family and friends;
- having no personal experience of work or the workplace;
- not knowing where to start in terms of career choice;
- having very limited awareness of the range of courses, occupations and careers that are available;
- not being able to find the information that they would find helpful in making career choices; and
- not having anyone to talk their career choice over with.

It is vitally important that young people are helped and supported to overcome these challenges and to make positive and purposeful moves into their future. A career offers young people a mechanism to turn their dreams into reality. Careers are built throughout life, rather than chosen at school. But, it is critical that young people understand that they have a career to build and that they recognise that the choices that they make at school will impact on this career. This includes making choices about GCSEs, A Levels and university, apprenticeship or further education. It also includes making the choice every day as to whether it is worth getting out of bed and trying hard in subjects that you find difficult.

We cannot just assume that young people will be able to start their careers automatically. Many young people need some help to avoid a failed transition. All benefit from access to good information and resources; however, as we will show, access to support has been in decline for a long while. While there are some welcome signs that government is emphasising career support more it will ultimately be the job of schools and colleges to find some way to support their students. In order to do this schools and colleges will need all of the resources and tools that they can get their hands on. However, the problem is that they are likely to struggle to fund new investment. Prioritising the funding of careers guidance is difficult for schools as their principle accountability is likely to remain focused on academic attainment rather than career development. In these circumstances schools may be particularly well disposed to tools that they can get for free or at low cost and that maximize the impact of the limited resources that teachers and schools have available.

It is also important that young people have the information, resources and help that they need to develop their career thinking, make career decisions and make purposeful moves into their futures. As we will argue in the next section, in England at the moment, accessing this kind of help and support is often difficult.

This paper explores the potential of an innovative and free new online careers resource from U-Explore called Start. In the paper we will examine how this software can support young people as well as its potential to support schools and policy makers to achieve their aims. Our conclusions are based on a literature review, an expert review of Start and a series of interviews conducted with the staff involved in developing and implementing the product. We aim to set out the rationale behind this new approach and show how it is seeking to address some of the challenges that schools and young people currently face ■

2. What does Start offer young people

Start is a free, online careers resource developed by U-Explore Ltd ⁽¹⁾. It provides access to a range of career learning tools for teachers, parents and learners. This section outlines how Start works, explains its main functionality and shows how the design of Start aligns with the existing evidence base in online career support resources.

Start is designed to provide independent, impartial and innovative career support for young people. It is freely available online and can be accessed on computers, mobile and tablet devices. It aims to create a space for career exploration and is designed to help students to connect ideas, interests and aspirations to possible career pathways. The name of the software is closely linked to its main purpose: giving young people a good start in their career.

Start builds on a long tradition of using computers, and more recently, online tools to provide career support. Watts (2002) recounts the history of information and communication technologies (ICT) and career development noting that it moved through four phases since the 1960s: mainframe, microcomputer, web and digital. During the final two phases a paradigm shift took place with individuals increasingly able to self-serve without direct reference to a careers professional.

We are now within Watts' digital phase and the evidence base on the use of digital technologies in career guidance continues to grow (Bimrose, Kettunen and Goddard, 2015; Bright, 2015; Hooley, 2012; Hooley, Hutchinson and Watts, 2010a, 2010b; Hooley, Shepherd and Dodds, 2015). At present there is no clear or globally accepted model of effective online career guidance. But innovative products, such as Start extend our understanding of what is possible and help us to build our understanding of what works.

The introduction of online and digital career guidance services has often been controversial. There has been some resistance to the use of online technologies to deliver career guidance by those who are worried about the loss of human contact, trivialisation and the over-simplification of complex problems (Goss and Hooley, 2015). These are legitimate concerns but they are not necessarily consequences of digital delivery. There is an emerging evidence base in career guidance alongside relevant and stronger evidence bases in the fields of online learning (Means et al., 2013) and online counselling (Richards and Viganó, 2013) that attests to the efficacy of digital approaches and the potential to combine them with professional expertise. Start offers an example of a digital product which is designed to be embedded within schools and complement the work of careers professionals.

Hooley, Hutchinson and Watts (2010a) summarise the functionality of online careers products noting that they can (1) provide information; (2) provide various kinds of automated interaction such as the kind of career diagnostics which lie at the heart of Start; and (3) provide a channel through which communication can take place. At the moment Start is delivering the first two of these services. It provides high quality labour market information and intelligence and a range of interactive and personalised services to help young people with their career development. There are also plans within the organisation in developing the resource so that it can support forms of communication.

Start builds on much of what the existing evidence base tells us about the efficacy of online products. It brings together information and advice for a young person and allows them to personalise their learning journey. It offers a blended learning technology in which the school can connect the online learning to classroom based career learning. It builds on longstanding career assessment practices by building a personal profile of work preferences, qualities, skills and interests and using this to match users to jobs and learning opportunities based on their suitability and how available those jobs are in the labour market. The fact that the software is freely available to schools also means that it has the opportunity to embed itself at the heart of the contemporary careers system in a way that no previous resource has promised to. Start therefore offers an interesting case study both because it meets a need within the education system in England and because it offers a case study of how new technologies can be integrated into careers provision whilst also being available outside the school environment.

The key innovation that lies at the heart of Start is its capacity to provide career support for individuals whilst integrating with and enhancing the wider career support that they are receiving from their school or college. Because Start tracks the career exploration that young people are doing and uses this to provide data to the institution where they are studying, it has the potential to create a genuinely blended guidance service which makes the most of both online and face-to-face services. In a previous paper (Hooley, Shepherd and Dodd, 2015: 45) we have described the kind of model of provision that Start represents as an 'enriched virtual model' where guidance services are positioned online but with strategically positioned face-to-face touch points. The way in which Start draws data on individual's online experience to allow educational providers to target their face-to-face provision strategically is one of its critical innovations.

¹ For more information see <http://www.startprofile.com>

What does Start do?

Young people do not all start thinking about their careers at the same time or in the same way. Because of this Start offers users a range of ways to think about their career. They may want to think about what they are interested in, what they are good at, where they want to live or what they want to do. None of these determine what career a young person should pursue on its own, but all offer a good starting place for exploration.

The purpose of the diagnosis is not to simply match a young person into an optimal career, but rather to provide a list of possibilities for the young person to explore. The philosophy of the resource is that there is no perfect match, but there are better and more informed choices. Start is designed to help young people move towards a clearer idea of what they want to do with their lives and then to help them to explore their career options and to progress into their chosen career.

Start is not seeking to replace careers advisers, teachers or any of the other people who provide young people with career support. It is a sophisticated resource which can provide young people with a starting point for their career thinking, but which, as we will discuss, can also be integrated into a school’s careers programme and into the work of careers professionals and teachers. However, Start has also been designed with the awareness that not all schools are prioritising careers. By providing high quality, interactive and personalised resources to all schools and young people, it hopes to level the playing field and ensure that all young people and their parents can access some career support.

Start grows to know you

Start is designed to offer tailored information to students. Students are linked to their school or college and the content that they are provided with is presented with an awareness of their locality. Alexander (2015) argues that locality provides a critical context for young people’s career decision making. Much rhetoric emphasises the idea of the ‘boundaryless career’ (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001) and global village in which we all live and are able to work anywhere. However, the reality is that we live and work in places and we benefit from being able to understand the career opportunities that exist around us. Because of this, a range of researchers have emphasised the importance of local labour market information, of the kind made available via Start, to young people’s career decision making (Enterprising Careers and the Institute for Employment Research, 2006).

Beyond offering geographically relevant information Start also includes diagnostic tools which ensure that learners encounter information that is relevant to their interests, aptitudes and aspirations. Start’s diagnostic tools build on a tradition of computer assisted guidance systems that goes back to at least the 1960s (Harris-Bowlsby, 2013). There is considerable research that supports the idea that these kinds of automated interactions can be highly effective if administered appropriately (Tracey, 2010; Betz and Turner, 2011). Harris-Bowlsbey (2013) recounts the evidence that supports the use of such systems, arguing that they increase occupational awareness, self-awareness and confidence in educational and career decisions. She also argues that there is some evidence that these systems support retention and progression within the education system.

Start is a computer assisted guidance system which works in a new way. It moves away from the idea of a single assessment and allows for a more incremental process. Learners gradually build their profile, adding in information about their preferences as they go. Each time they add more, Start refines the information that it provides to them. Students can enter the following information about themselves to help to refine the careers that Start presents them with:

- Interests. What you are interested in e.g. drawing, fashion or languages.
- Skills. What you are able to do e.g. computer skills, motivating people or problem solving.
- Qualities. Aspects of your personality e.g. confident, dynamic or flexible.
- Work preferences. How you would like to spend your time at work e.g. being your own boss, working in challenging environments or meeting new people.

As students reflect on their interests, skills, qualities and work preferences they gradually build up a profile of themselves which Start links to jobs. This then allows students to explore and reflect on which ones would be suitable for them and why.

Start draws together a vast amount of information on jobs, qualifications and careers which is presented to learners in a personalised way. The ability to draw on a wide variety of resources and organise them in a unique way for the individual is one of the key advantages of intelligent online systems such as Start (McLoughlin and Lee, 2010). As learners reflect on the information that they are presented with, Start gradually learns more about them and continues to refine the information that they are presented with.

Supporting exploration

At the heart of Start is a 'job bank' which includes around 1,600 jobs. The job bank draws on LMI ⁽²⁾ for All to provide detailed information about a wide range of jobs. This information includes the qualifications required for different jobs, typical salaries and the level of demand for the job. Linked to this is a live job feed which helps young people to take the temperature of the labour market by viewing the jobs that are currently available in this field.

The software does not just provide factual information, but also draws on multi-media qualitative information such as icould videos ⁽³⁾ and the Three Minute Hero campaign ⁽⁴⁾. This qualitative information is just as important as the facts and figures that are drawn from LMI for All, as it offers the opportunity for students to access locally driven content from real people with real stories.

Future developments

Start has been developed using an iterative design process. Iterative design is a design methodology which is commonly used in software development which uses a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analysing, and refining a product. Key to iterative design is an enthusiasm to make the software available and to listen to users' feedback.

The team talk about Start going through an ongoing ‘optimisation process’ with rigorous internal testing and rapid response to user feedback. A key development task that is currently underway is the involvement of experts in particular jobs in the validation of the job profiles and other career-related content on the site.

The team is also constantly experimenting with new features and functionality. One new piece of functionality will be the capacity to send learners push notifications that link with their profiles. So for example, where a student has expressed interest in engineering jobs they will start to receive notifications of jobs and courses that are relevant to engineering. Another example of planned new functionality is the development of an e-portfolio tool ■

² LMI for All (<http://www.lmiforall.org.uk/>) is an online data portal provided by the government, which connects and standardises existing sources of high quality, reliable labour market information (LMI) with the aim of informing careers decisions.

³ icould (<http://icould.com/>) produces careers videos that highlights the complex career paths that individuals take across their lives.

⁴ The Three Minute Hero campaign is an attempt by U-Explore to crowdsource career narratives from a wide range of people. Further information on the Three Minute Hero campaign can be found at hero.startprofile.com.

3. Why do schools need Start?

Schools in England have a statutory duty to provide their students with independent careers guidance (DfE, 2015). Such career guidance provision is not envisioned as just concerned with the provision of information about careers, but is rather about providing a programme of learning, experiences, inspiration and advice that enables young people to firstly make positive and purposeful choices while they are at school and secondly to leave school with the skills that they need to manage their career across their lifetime.

In the past such career support was provided by a partnership between schools and an external agency: first the Youth Employment Service; then the Careers Service; and finally Connexions was responsible for the external delivery (Peck, 2004). At one level the distinction that underpinned the partnership was drawn between career advice and guidance which was largely the province of the Careers Service, and career education which largely belonged to the school (Hooley, Watts and Andrews, 2015).

In 2010 the way in which career support was provided to schools was transformed. Firstly, many of the programmes which provided external career support (Connexions, Education Business Partnerships and Aimhigher) were cut. Then, the Education Act 2011 shifted responsibility for the provision of career guidance from local authorities to schools (Hooley and Watts, 2011). This resulted in a reduction in the quantity and quality of career education and guidance (Hooley, Matheson and Watts, 2014).

Schools struggled to work out how best to discharge their new responsibilities whilst the market in providers of resources and services to schools hastily reorganised itself. A key design flaw in the new marketised system was that there was no new money to support the development of the market.

As part of our commitment to extend opportunity to all young people, we want to level the playing field - making sure they are aware of all the options open to them and are able to make the right choice for them.
Nicky Morgan

While the Prime Minister announced £70 million of new funding for careers (Prime Minister's Office, 2016).

So I can announce that we are going to launch a new national campaign led by Christine Hodgson, Chair of CapGemini UK and the Careers and Enterprise Company, and it will work with business, charities and the public sector to build a new generation of high-quality mentors. We'll direct £70 million towards careers in this Parliament, primarily to the Careers and Enterprise Company who will lead this major new effort to recruit mentors for young teenagers with a focus on the 25,000 about to start their GCSEs who we know are underachieving or at risk of dropping out.
David Cameron

The current market in school's careers provision

Concern about the current state of career support has now reached the top with both education secretary Nicky Morgan and the Prime Minister making speeches about it in 2016. Morgan has spoken out about the importance of schools making young people aware of all of the life chance that they can pursue (Department for Education and Morgan, N. (2016).

Careers work in schools is now back on the political agenda, but the old infrastructure for delivery has been largely dismantled. Schools are now responsible for the delivery of career guidance, but many are desperate for resources, help and ideas. In the past they would have turned to the Careers Service or Connexions, but these organisations have now gone. Instead they are now faced with a bewildering range of external providers. Some of these are provided by the government (Careers and Enterprise Company, National Careers Service and Jobcentre Plus), and some are available locally through the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) or local authorities. Other schools are accessing free provision from a range of employers, charities and professional bodies while still others are buying in a range of services.

Given the current policy of school autonomy and marketisation, it is no bad thing if a vibrant market of different providers emerges, as long as schools are able to find out information about what is offered and make informed decisions about it.

However, the current free-for-all runs the risk of tempting schools to engage in what we have elsewhere described as an 'activity' model of career support (Hooley et al., 2012). In such a model schools provide young people with lots of opportunities to access career learning, experiences and support, but these are provided in an ad hoc way, are often poorly integrated with the curriculum and difficult for students to learn from. Start aims to help schools to avoid this kind of disconnected and ineffective provision by making it easier for the school to see how much students are engaging with their careers following career learning activities.

The emergence of a market in careers provision has so far been predicated on two main sources of funding. Firstly, on the continued involvement of local authorities in this space (Langley, Hooley and Bertuchi, 2014) and secondly on direct funding from school’s budgets. At the present time this kind of funding base seems very fragile as the finances of local authorities continue to deteriorate (Butler, 2015) and school’s budgets are now getting increasingly squeezed (Adams, 2016).

One consequence of this is the potential for a gulf to open up between the political rhetoric (which is increasingly positive about careers) and the reality on the ground (where schools are left to deliver careers programmes with no new resources or support).

Recent research has concluded that across the country there is an uneven provision of career support and that, even more worryingly, more deprived schools are likely to be providing less career support than those that are more advantaged (Archer and Moote, 2016). The launch of Start as a free resource which all schools can make use of without the need to find new resources is therefore a valuable new addition to the picture and one that schools are likely to find appealing.

Start therefore offers a very attractive new package to schools and colleges as it can help them to deliver high quality career guidance to their students. Perhaps most importantly Start is not dependent on a particular strand of government funding. The story of career guidance in England has been one of endless ups and downs. Many schools have become weary of the political cycle whereby new initiatives are launched, refocused and closed down. This approach has had the effect of fostering dependence which has ultimately been disastrous when government funding has been cut. U-Explore hopes that Start will empower schools by allowing them to build their programmes on an infrastructure which can endure regardless of the whims of government.

What does ‘good’ look like?

In an influential report, The Gatsby Charitable Foundation (2014) defined what constitutes ‘good career guidance’ through the publication of eight benchmarks. Schools, Gatsby argued, should: (1) provide a stable careers programme; (2) allow young people to learn from career and labour market information; (3) address the needs of each pupil; (4) link curriculum learning to careers; (5) facilitate encounters with employers and employees; (6) provide experiences of workplaces; (7) facilitate encounters with further and higher education; and (8) provide access to personal guidance.

Start can support schools in meeting these benchmarks. It is particularly critical for helping schools to develop, monitor and evaluate a careers programme (see benchmark 1), to provide career and labour market information (see benchmark 2) and gain access to tracking and monitoring tools which make addressing the needs of pupils possible (see benchmark 3).

The statutory responsibility for career guidance places new demands on schools to deliver high quality, independent and impartial career guidance. This is backed up by Ofsted’s (2016:14) Common Inspection Framework which states:

Inspectors will make a judgement on the personal development, behaviour and welfare of children and learners by evaluating the extent to which the provision is successfully promoting and supporting children’s and other learners’ choices about the next stage of their education, employment, self-employment or training, where relevant, from impartial careers advice and guidance.

If schools want to discharge these responsibilities well, perhaps by drawing on the Gatsby benchmarks, they need resources to help them to do this. Start can be helpful in doing this as it provides a focal point for the school’s careers activities and helps to connect them together.

Start is a useful product for individual learners as well as a resource which can be embedded by schools. It is conceived as a resource which can support schools to deliver career guidance and provide young people with access to a wide range of labour market information in a way which is meaningful.

Start offers schools the following:

- A diagnostic tool and self-study resource for students’ career learning.
- Teacher resources including webinars, downloadable careers schemes of work and lesson resources.
- Tracking and monitoring tools which allow schools to see what information students are accessing and respond to these interests.

The ability to monitor and track students is particularly useful as schools are under increasing pressure to ensure that students go on to positive destinations. Monitoring both their engagement with careers and their post-school destination can be useful for this.

Start makes delivering a careers programme easier for schools, but it does not seek to replace teachers or careers professionals. U-Explore is keen to stress that the schools which get the most out of the software will be the schools which are passionate about supporting students to maximize their potential and achieve career success. These schools will integrate Start with wider classroom based provision, work experience, one-to-one guidance and a range of other sources of support.

Initial uptake

Start only launched in early 2016. It is too early to attempt a full-evaluation of the software. However, U-Explore reports that the schools that have engaged with Start so far have been enthusiastic about it. Over 800 schools are signed up with thousands of students from these schools already using the product.

Some insights into the future effectiveness of the software can be seen in those areas where initial sign up has been strong. U-Explore reports that there are areas where most of the schools have already signed up and in such areas it is possible to see the development of a new kind of career guidance ecosystem.

U-Explore explains that schools have begun to embed the software in a variety of ways. Some schools have simply sent it out to students and encouraged them to use it, whilst others have embedded it more deeply into curriculum. All are keen to use it as part of their strategy to meet their statutory requirements and to provide evidence of their provision of career guidance to Ofsted.

Track

Schools can buy a greater level of access to the data created by Start through Track. Track is a premium ‘upgrade’ which allows schools to see a greater amount of detail about what students are doing on Start and to make use of that data. Track provides schools with the following tools:

- **Student Profiles** - aimed to provide a simple and brief summary for every student and it designed to bolster the personal guidance process.
- **Access Report** - evidence of activities and time spent on Start, helping schools and colleges to evidence access to information for every student.
- **On Track Report** - details of the jobs that students are interested in alongside their personal suitability for the role and how available each job is in the local labour market.
- **Aspirations Report** - identifies the preferred destinations, qualifications and job roles for all students individually, by year group or target group.
- **Skills Report** - identifies skills gaps across cohorts of students and assists in the planning of targeted interventions for improvement.

The resources provided by Track are likely to be useful for schools which want to integrate Start more fully into the monitoring and evaluation of their careers programme.

Is it really free?

Start is built on two basic assumptions. Firstly, that schools need help in providing high quality, independent and impartial career guidance. Secondly, that schools are not going to be able to pay very much (if anything) for the resources that they need to deliver this. This creates a major conundrum which Start has developed an innovative answer to.

U-Explore describes how it has become increasingly difficult to get schools to pay for software and resources. School budgets are increasingly squeezed and with so many different demands on schools, companies which have successfully sold software directly to schools in the past are increasingly being turned away.

U-Explore is confident of delivering a commercially sustainable model despite the fact that Start will remain free to use. The company's business model has been built to be independent of any direct government funding and a substantial financial investment has been made in the development and rollout of Start. This development capital has been provided by the entrepreneur and philanthropist Matthew Riley and the company has developed an innovative internet based business model. U-Explore reports that it has already signed up over 800 schools and it can see a clear pathway to the profitability and sustainability of Start.

U-Explore anticipates that the software will provide the infrastructure for a new careers ecosystem which will be beneficial to everyone. The aspiration is to use Start to join up the interests of a range of different stakeholders. By increasing the strength of the connections between schools, colleges, universities and other stakeholders, it is hoped that Start will bring about a more integrated system ■

4. Why does England need Start?

There are considerable advantages to achieving a good alignment between education and employment and ensuring that young people are well prepared for the labour market. The OECD (2004) has argued that effective career guidance can support this alignment and contribute to economic, educational and social policy goals.

In a recent review of the evidence for the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (Hooley, 2014) we found that a substantial evidence base exists to back these claims up. In particular, the evidence suggests that good quality career guidance can bring about impacts at a range of levels from the individual (e.g. finding a job) to the societal (e.g. supporting social mobility). The evidence also supported the idea that career guidance should be provided in a multi-modal way which combined face to face services with online provision. This was endorsed by our work in Norway where we argued that online career guidance provision should be imported into the heart of the Norwegian career guidance system (Hooley, Shepherd and Dodd, 2015).

In our paper on the economic benefits of career guidance (Hooley and Dodd, 2015) we linked these findings about the evidence base and policy impacts of career guidance to the current programme of the UK government. We highlighted that career guidance could support the reduction of the deficit, increasing productivity, raising living standards and creating economic growth. However, at present England's career guidance system is underpowered to deliver many of these policy goals. We believe that the provision of high quality online resources like Start is a key component of the career guidance system that is required to deliver these kinds of impacts.

As we have already discussed the current government has overseen a change in career guidance policy. The government has ceased cutting and begun rebuilding the system. However, we are unlikely to see a rebirth of the Careers Service or Connexions. The Careers and Enterprise Company, while a welcome initiative is a very different type of organisation. It will provide resources and access to employers, while schools will be expected to lead the redevelopment of career guidance.

The policy benefits of high quality career guidance therefore rest on the shoulders of schools. As these schools often have stretched budgets and limited expertise in the delivery of career guidance they are likely to be desperately in need of help. Because of this, products like Start will be critical.

Start offers schools high quality resources. It also has the potential to open up new kinds of linkages between a range of local stakeholders (schools, colleges, universities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and employers). One of the key advantages that Start offers for all of these stakeholders is the fact that it tracks user behaviour. The data that is gathered from this tracking has enormous value as it can potentially be transformed into intelligence that can underpin the local skills system. For example if Local Enterprise Partnerships were able to access data on the career interests and likely educational choices of young people within their area, such information could be fed into local skills and economic planning processes.

For researchers Start also offers some exciting possibilities. The opportunity to gather large scale data on young people's career exploration and decision-making and then to track them as they move through the education system and beyond offers enormous potential. Such data opens up the possibility of gaining an enhanced understanding of career development which in turn may offer further insights that may inform the development of Start and wider career guidance provision. The authors of this report hope to remain closely involved in the development of Start and to make use of this unique data source to help understand the impact of the software and to explore wider questions about career development.

If Start establishes itself as the leading career support resource for schools it has the potential to make a real difference to schools and students. Start also offers to make a major contribution to the development of the education and employment system both by enhancing the efficiency of this system and by providing data from which new strategic insights can be built ■

5. Conclusions

In the twenty-first century, young people need to be skilled and flexible. This means that they need to make positive choices about qualifications while they are at schools and build skills for their post-school lives. Schools have always had a responsibility to prepare young people for their life and career, but since 2011 the responsibility to provide career guidance has become wholly that of the school. Inevitably this means that schools are looking for help to ensure that they provide their students with the best possible start in life and deliver good career guidance.

Start is designed to provide schools with an innovative, comprehensive and affordable career guidance resource. The software supports young peoples' career decision-making and their exploration of the labour market and the education system.

Start can help schools to meet their statutory duties, satisfy Ofsted and provide what the Gatsby Charitable Foundation describes as ‘good career guidance’. It does this by viewing schools as the key intermediaries who can support young people’s career development. The software provides schools with a structure for careers work and invaluable intelligence on the level of learner engagement with careers. As such Start is not attempting to replace professional career education and guidance, but rather to augment it and to make it easier for schools to discharge their statutory duties.

At a systemic level Start offers a sustainable approach for the provision of career support. As it achieves widespread market penetration it will create a careers ecosystem within which schools, colleges, universities and employers are all able to interact more easily and to mutual benefit. The way in which Start tracks the career exploration and career decision making of learners also opens up exciting opportunities for researchers and policymakers. As this data becomes available it promises to provide valuable insights and intelligence on individuals' career development and on the operation of the education and employment system.

The present study is not an evaluation of Start. The product is only just emerging into the market. If it is to be successful it is important that the team continue to pursue a developmental iterative design process and that they continue to seek feedback from users and input from external evaluations. The authors of this report are keen to remain closely involved with Start as it unfolds and to use the data that the software captures both to inform its ongoing development and to answer wider research questions.

There is much to be excited about with Start. It offers a new approach to an old problem and as it develops it may pave the way to a much more effective education and employment system in England ■

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